

A WOLF IN THE FOLD.

A DOMESTIC STORY WITH A MORAL.

CHAPTER XXV.—(CONTINUED.)

Having finished her tasks, Alida was finally drying her hands on a towel that hung near a window. Suddenly, she caught sight of a dark face peering in. Her startled cry brought Holcroft hastily to her feet. "What's the matter?" he asked.

"I saw"—Then she hesitated from a fear that he would rush into some unknown danger. The rough crew without perceived that their presence was known, and Tim Weeks cried, "Now, all together."

A frightful overture began at once, the hooting and yelling almost drowning the instrumental part and sending to Alida's heart that awful chill of fear produced by human voices in any mob-like assemblage. Holcroft understood the affair at once, for he was familiar with the custom, but she did not. He threw open the door with the purpose of sternly expostulating with the disturbers of the peace and of threatening them with the law unless they retired.

With an instinct to share his danger she stepped to his side, and this brought a yell of derision. Lurid thoughts swept through her mind. She had brought this danger. Her story had become known. What might they not do to Holcroft? Under the impulse of vague terror and complete self-sacrifice, she stepped forward and cried, "I only am to blame. I will go away forever if you will spare"—But again the scornful clamor rose and drowned her voice.

Her action and words had been so swift that Holcroft could not interfere, but in an instant he was at her side, his arm around her, his square jaw set, and his eyes blazing with his kindling anger. He was not one of those men who fume early under provocation and in words chiefly. His manner and gesture were so impressive that his tormentors paused to listen.

"I know," he said, quietly, "all about this old, rude custom—that it's often little more than a rough lark. Well, now that you've had it, leave it at once. I'm in no mood for such attention from my neighbors. This is my wife, and I'll break any man's head who says a word to hurt her feelings."

"Oh, yes, take care of her feelings, now it's your turn. They must've been hurt before," piped up Tim Weeks.

"Good for you, old man, for showin' us your poor-house bride," said another.

"We don't fancy such grass-widders, and much married, half-married, women in Oakville," yelled a third.

"Why didn't yer jump over a broomstick for a weddin' ceremony?" some one else bawled.

These insults were fired almost in a volley. Alida felt Holcroft's arm grow rigid for a second. "Go in, quick," he said. Then she saw him seize the hickory sapling he had leaned against the house, and burst upon the group like a thunderbolt. Cries of pain, yells and oaths of rage rose above the rain of blows. The older members of the crew sought to close upon him, but he sprang back, and the tough sapling swept about him like a circle of light. It was a terrific weapon in the hands of a strong man, now possessed of almost giant strength in his rage. More than one fellow went down under its stinging cut, and heads and faces were bleeding. The younger portion of the crowd speedily took to their heels, and soon even the most stubborn fled, the farmer vigorously assisting their ignominious retreat with tremendous downward blows on any within reach. Tim Weeks had managed to keep out of the way till they entered the lane; then, taking a small stone from the fence, he hurled it at their pursuer and attempted to jump over the wall. This was old and gave way under him in such a way that he fell on the other side. Holcroft leaped the fence with a bound, but Tim, lying on his back, shrieked and held up his hands. "You won't hit a feller when he's down."

"No," said Holcroft, arresting his hickory. "I'll send you to jail, Tim Weeks. That stone you fired cut my head. Was your father in that crowd?"

"N-o-o," blubbered Tim.

"If he was, I'd follow him home, and whip him in his own house. Now, clear out, and tell the rest of your rowdy crew that I'll shoot the first one of you that disturbs me again. I'll send the constable for you, and maybe for some of the others."

Dire the dismay, and dreadful the groaning in Oakville that night. Never before had salves and poultices been in such demand. Not a few would be disfigured for weeks, and wherever Holcroft's blows had fallen wails arose like whistling. In Lemuel Week's dwelling the consternation reached its climax. Tim, bruised from his fall, limped in and told his portentous story.

In his spite, he added, "I don't care, I hit him hard. His face was all bloody."

"All bloody!" groaned his father. "Lord a' mercy! He can send you to jail, sure enough!"

Then Mrs. Weeks sat down and wailed aloud.

CHAPTER XXVI.—"YOU DON'T KNOW."

As Timothy Weeks limped hastily away, Holcroft, with a strong revulsion of feeling, thought of Alida. He had been able to answer insults in a way eminently satisfactory to himself and every blow had relieved his electrical condition. But how about the poor woman who had received worse blows than he had inflicted? As he hastened towards the house he recalled a dim impression of seeing her sink down on the doorstep. Then he remembered her effort to face the marauders alone. "She said she was to blame, poor child! as if there were any blame at all!" She said, "spare him, as if I was facing a band of murderers instead of a lot of neighborhood scamps, and that she'd go away. I'd fight all Oakville, men, women and children, before I'd permit that," and she started on a run.

He found Alida on the step where she had sunk as if struck down by the rough epithets hurled at her. She was sobbing violently, almost hysterically, and at first could not reply to his soothing words. He lifted her up, and carried her within to a chair. "Oh, oh," she cried, "why did I not realize it more fully before? Selfish woman that I was, to marry you and bring on you all this shame and danger. I should have thought of it all, I ought to have died rather than do you such a wrong."

"Alida, Alida," protested Holcroft, "if it were all to do over again I'd be a thousand times more"—

"Oh, I know, I know. You are brave and honest. I saw that much when you first spoke to me. I yielded to the temptation to secure such a friend; I was too cowardly to face the world alone. And now see what's happened! You're in danger and disgrace on my account. I must go away—I must do what I should have done at first," and with her face buried in her hands she rocked back and forth overwhelmed by the bitterness and reproach of her thoughts.

"Alida," he urged, "please be calm and sensible. Let me reason with you and tell you the truth. All that's happened is that the Oakville clubs have received a well-deserved whipping. When you get calm, I can explain everything so it won't seem half so bad. Neither you nor I are in any danger look me in the eyes and listen."

His words were almost stern in their earnestness. She raised her streaming eyes to his face, then sprung up, exclaiming, "Oh! you're wounded!"

"What's that compared with your talk of going away?"

All explanations and re-assurances would have been trivial in effect compared with the truth that he had been hurt in her defence. She dashed her tears right and left, ran for a basin of water, and making him take her chair, began washing away the blood stains.

"Thunder!" he said, laughing, "how quickly we've changed places!"

"Oh, oh," she moaned, "it's a terrible wound; it might have killed you, and they will kill you yet."

He took her hands and held them firmly. "Alida," he said, gravely yet kindly, "be still and listen to me."

For a moment or two longer, her bosom heaved with convulsive sobs and then she grew quiet. "Don't you know you can't go away?" he asked, still leaning her hands and looking in her face.

"I could for your sake," she began.

"No, it wouldn't be for my sake. I don't wish you to go, and wouldn't let you. If you should let the Oakville rabble drive you away I would be in danger, and so would others, for I'd be worse on 'em than an earthquake. After the lesson they've had to-night, they'll let us alone, and I'll let them alone. You know I've tried to be honest with you from the first. Believe me then, the trouble's over, unless we make more for ourselves. Now, promise you'll do as I say and let me manage."

"I'll try," she breathed softly.

"No, no, that won't do. I'm beginning to find you out. You may get some foolish self-sacrificing notion in your head that it would be best for me, when it would be my ruination. Will you promise?"

"Yes."

"Famous! Now you can bathe my head as you please, for it feels a little queer."

"It's an awful wound," she said in tones of the deepest sympathy. "Oh! I'm so sorry."

"Pshaw! my head is too hard for that little scamp of a Weeks to break. His turn'll come next."

She cut away the blood-clotted hair and bound up the rather severe scalp wound with a tenderness and sympathy that expressed itself even in her touch. She was too confused and excited to be conscious of herself, but she had received some tremendous strong impressions. Chief among them was the truth that nothing which had happened made any difference in him—that he was still the same loyal friend, standing between her and her own impulse towards self-sacrifice. Sweetest of all was the assurance that he did this for his own sake as well as hers. These facts seemed like a foothold in the mad torrent of feeling and shame, which had been sweeping her away. She could think of little more than that she was safe—safe because he was brave and loyal, and yes, safe because he wanted her and would not give her up. The heart of a woman must be callous indeed, and her nature not only trivial but stony, if she is not deeply moved under circumstances like these.

In spite of his laughing contempt of danger, she trembled as she saw him ready to go out again; she wished to accompany him on his round of observation, but he scouted the idea, although it pleased him. Standing in the door, she strained her eyes and listened breathlessly. He soon returned and said, "They've all had enough. We won't be disturbed again."

He saw that her nerves needed quieting, and he set about the task with such simple tact as he possessed. His first step was to light his pipe in the most nonchalant manner, and then he burst out laughing. "I'll hang that hickory up. It has done too good service to be put to common use again. Probably you never heard of a skimleton, Alida. Well, they are not so uncommon in this region. I suppose I'll have to own up to taking part in one myself when I was a chap. They usually are only rough larks and are taken good-naturedly. I'm not on jesting terms with my neighbors and they had no business to come here, but I wouldn't have made any row if they hadn't insulted you."

Her head bowed very low as she faltered, "They've heard every thing."

He came right to her and took her hand. "Didn't I hear everything before they did?"

"Yes."

"Well, Alida, I'm not only satisfied with you, but I'm very grateful to you. Why shouldn't I be when you are a good, Christian woman? I guess I'm the one to be suited, not Oakville. I should be as reckless as the devil if you should go away from me. Don't I act like a man who's ready to stand up for and protect you?"

"Yes, too ready. It would kill me if anything happened to you on my account."

"Well, the worst would happen," he said firmly, "if we don't go right on as we've begun. If we go quietly on about our own affairs, we'll soon be let alone and that's all we ask."

"Yes, yes indeed. Don't worry, James. I'll do as you wish."

"Famous! You never said 'James' to me before. Why haven't you?"

"I don't know," she faltered, with a sudden rush of color to her pale face.

"You don't know how a woman feels when a man stands up for her as you did to-night?"

"Well, I know how a man feels when there is a woman so well worth standing up for. It was a lucky thing that I had nothing heavier in my hand than that hickory. All the while he was looking at her curiously; then he spoke his thought, 'You're a quiet little woman, Alida, most times, but you're capable of a thunder-gust now and then.'"

"I'll try to be quiet at all times," she replied, with drooping eyes.

"Oh, I'm not complaining," he said laughing, "I like the trait."

He took a small pitcher and went to the dairy. Returning, he poured out two glasses of milk and said, "Here's to your health and happiness, Alida; and when I don't stand up for the woman who started out to save me from a mob of murderers, may the next thing I eat or drink choke me. You didn't know they were merely a lot of Oakville boys, did you?"

"You can't make so light of it," said she. "They tried to close on you, and if that stone had struck you on the temple, it might have killed you. They swore like pirates, and looked like ruffians with their blackened faces. They certainly were not boys in appearance."

"I'm afraid I swore too," he said, sadly. "You had some excuse, but I'm sorry. They would have hurt you if you hadn't kept them off."

"Yes, they'd probably given me a beating. People do things in hot blood they wish they hadn't afterwards. I know this Oakville rough-suff. Since we've had it out, and they know what to expect, they'll give me a wide berth. Now go and sleep. You were never safer in your life."

She did not trust herself to reply, but the glance she gave him from her tearful eyes was so eloquent with grateful feeling that he was suddenly conscious of some unwonted sensations. He again patrolled the place and tied the dog near the barn.

"It's barely possible that some of these mean cusses might venture to kindle a fire, but a bark from Towser will warn 'em off. She is a spirited little woman," he added, with a sharp change in soliloquy. "There's nothing milk and water about her. Thunder! I felt like kissing her when she looked at me so. I guess that crack on my skull has made me a little light-headed."

He lay down in his clothes so that he might rush out in case of any alarm, and he intended to keep awake. Then, the first thing he knew, the sun was shining in the windows.

It was long before Alida slept, and the burden of her thoughts confirmed the words that she had spoken so involuntarily. "You don't know how a woman feels when a man stands up for her as you did." It was the nature of her sex to adore hardy, courageous manhood. Beyond all power of expression, Alida felt her need of a champion and protector. She was capable of going away for his sake, but she would go in terror and despair. The words that had smitten her confirmed all her old fears of facing the world alone. Then came the overpowering thought of his loyalty and kindness, of his utter and almost fierce repugnance to the idea of her leaving him. In contrast with the man who had deceived and wronged her, Holcroft's course overwhelmed her very soul with a passion of grateful affection.

A new emotion, unlike any thing she had ever known, thrilled her heart and covered her face with blushes. "I could die for him," she murmured.

She awoke late in the morning. When at last she entered the kitchen she stopped in deep chagrin, for Holcroft had almost completed preparations for breakfast. "Ha, ha!" he laughed, "turn about is fair play."

"Well," she sighed, "there's no use of making excuses now."

"There's no occasion for any. Did you ever see such a looking case as I am with this bandage around my head?"

"Does it pain you?" she asked, sympathetically.

"Well, it does. It pains like thunder."

"The wound needs dressing again. Let me cleanse and bind it up."

"Yes, after breakfast."

"No, indeed, now. I couldn't eat any breakfast while you were suffering so."

"I'm more unfeeling than than you are, for I could."

She insisted on having her way and then tore up her handkerchief to supply a soft linen bandage.

"You're extravagant, Alida," but she only shook her head.

"Famous! That feels better. What a touch you have! Now if you had a broken head my fingers would be like a pair of tongs."

She only shook her head and smiled.

"You're as bad as Jane used to be. She never said a word when she could shake or nod her meaning."

reason that he saw in her an accomplice with her husband in the fraud of Mrs. Mumpson.

"I hope you're not badly hurt," she began.

"I might be worse."

"O Mr. Holcroft," she broke out sobbingly, "spare my son. It would kill me if you sent him to prison."

"He took the chance of killing me last night," was the cold reply. "What was far worse, he insulted my wife."

"O Mr. Holcroft, he was young and foolish, he didn't realize"—

"Were you and your husband young and foolish," he interrupted bitterly, "when you gulled me into employing that crazy cousin of yours?"

This retort was so overwhelming that Mrs. Weeks sobbed speechlessly.

Alida could not help overhearing the conversation, and she now glided into the room and stood by her husband's side.

"James," she said, "won't you do me a favor, a great kindness?"

Mrs. Weeks raised her eyes and looked wonderingly at this dreadful woman, against whom all Oakville was talking.

"I know what you wish, Alida," he replied, sternly, "but I can't do it. This is a case for justice. This woman's son was the leader of that vile crowd that insulted you last night. I can forgive his injuring me, but not the words he used about you. Moreover, when I was alone and struggling to keep my home, Mrs. Weeks took part with her husband in imposing on me their fraud of a cousin and in tricking me out of honest money. Any woman with a heart in her breast would have tried to help a man situated as I was. No, it's a clear case of justice and her son shall go to jail."

Mrs. Weeks wailed afresh at this final sentence. Holcroft was amazed to see his wife drop on her knees beside his chair. He raised her instantly. "Don't do such a thing as that," he said huskily.

Without removing her pleading eyes from his face she asked, gently, "Who told us to forgive as we would be forgiven? James, I shall be very unhappy if you don't grant this mother's prayer."

He tried to turn away, but she caught his hand and held his eyes with hers. "Alida," he said, in strong agitation, "you heard the vile, false words that Timothy Weeks said last night. They struck you down like a blow. Can you forgive him?"

"Yes, and I plead with you to forgive him. Grant me my wish, James; I shall be so much happier and so will you."

"Well, Mrs. Weeks, now you know what kind of a woman your son came to insult. You may tell your neighbors that there's one Christian in Oakville. I yield to Mrs. Holcroft and will take no further action in the affair if we are let alone."

Mrs. Weeks was not a bad woman at heart, and she had received a wholesome lesson. She came and took Alida's hand as she said, "Yes, you are a Christian—a better woman than I've been, but I ain't so mean and bad but what, when I see my fault, I am sorry and can ask forgiveness. I do ask your forgiveness, Mr. Holcroft. I've been ashamed of myself ever since you brought my cousin back. I thought she would try, when she had the chance you gave her, but she seems to have no sense."

"There, there, let bygones be bygones," said the farmer in embarrassment. "I've surrendered. Please don't say anything more."

"You've got a kind heart in spite of"—

"Oh, come now, please quit, or I'll begin to swear a little to keep up the reputation my neighbors have given me. Go home and tell Tim to brace up and try to be a man. When I say I'm done with a grudge, I am done. You and Mrs. Holcroft can talk all you like, but please excuse me," and with more than most men's horror of a scene, he escaped precipitately.

"Sit down, Mrs. Weeks," said Alida, kindly.

"Well, I will. I can't say much to excuse myself or my folks"—

"You've already said everything, Mrs. Weeks," interrupted Alida, gently, "you've said you are sorry."

Mrs. Weeks stared a moment, and then resumed, sentimentally, "Well, I've heard more gospel in that remark than if I'd gone to church. And I couldn't go to church, I could never have gone there again or held my head up anywhere if—if—"

"That's all past and gone," said Alida, smiling. "When Mr. Holcroft says anything, you may depend on it."

"Well, God bless you for intercedin'—you had so much to forgive. Nobody shall ever speak a word against you again while I've got breath to answer. I wish you'd let me come and see you sometimes."

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